Designing a Structured Immersion Model for English Language Learners: Learning From the Success of Synergy Academies

Slides 1–4

PEGGIE: Welcome. This is Peggie Garcia from the National Charter School Resource Center. Welcome to the webinar *Designing a Structured Immersion Model for English Language Learners: Learning From the Success of Synergy Academies.* The National Charter School Resource Center is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, and this is the sixth in our series of 12 webinars that are devoted to ELL-related issues.

I'm going to turn it over to Meg Palisoc in a few moments, but before I do that I'm going to go ahead and provide everyone with a quick orientation to the webinar platform. On the left-hand side of the platform is a chat box, so we encourage you to enter chats at any time. If you have questions that occur to you, please go ahead and enter them at any time during the webinar. We'll keep a running list of questions and then, after Meg is done with her presentation, we'll go ahead and start on the list. You are welcome to listen to the audio either through the phone or over your computer. If you joined by phone please mute your computer speakers to prevent an echo effect. If you would like to listen over the phone, if you have audio problems during the webinar, please go ahead and switch to the phone if you're trying to listen over your computer. The conference number and the participant code you need are in the chat, so please feel free to join by phone at any time. Below the chat window is a file share window. I've put a file there called Synergy pdf, so if you can just click on that file, a "save to my computer" button will pop up and you can go ahead and hit that button and download it to your computer.

I did send out a slide set this morning, so if you printed that out, that's great. We did make a couple of changes today. We added a couple of more slides, so the slide set that's in the file share is slightly different from what I sent out this morning. Below the slides are a series of participant notes; just a reminder that to ask a question, please go ahead and enter it at any time in the chat box. If you'd like to make the text on the screen

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larger, you can use the full-screen option on the top right. [AUDIO SKIP] You should use a wired connection for your computer as opposed to wireless, clear all applications other than Adobe that are running on your computer, and clear your browser's cache and cookies. Finally, the webinar is being recorded and an archive will be available within three business days at the website you see at the bottom of the participant notes.

I'd like to thank everyone for joining us and I'd like to particularly thank Meg Palisoc. She's one of our board members and supports us throughout the year, and is providing even extra special support by agreeing to present on this webinar today. Meg is a teacher, cofounder, and CEO of Synergy Academies, so she wears three different hats, which is pretty impressive. She was an administrator previously at the University of Southern California and noticed that many of the students she was working with who were from inner-city public schools were not as well prepared academically as their peers. She set out to solve that problem by opening three charter schools in Los Angeles, and is having phenomenal success. She will tell you more about her journey, a little bit more about herself, and more about how they are achieving the success and the results that they have at her three schools. It's very impressive. I'm going to go ahead and turn it over to Meg. Welcome.

Slides 5 and 6

MEG: Thanks Peggie. A little bit about what our topic is for today, I want to share about how Synergy implements a structured English immersion model, and before I go into that I'll add a little bit more about my background. Thanks for that introduction; that really was a good introduction about my background. I am a former university administrator, and that was my original background. I have a master's degree in higher education administration. I worked with college students in a number of different capacities in the student affairs arena and before I actually started my charter schools, I became an inner-city elementary school teacher with the Los Angeles Unified School District in the inner city of south Los Angeles. It was for those reasons that Peggie shared that I realized at the university level I could not help remediate 13 years of a poor education for students who I saw either could not get into a prestigious university or who did get in but were dropping out because they couldn't handle the curriculum. So, I became an inner-city school teacher and taught first and third grades

near USC. Then I started for the last eight years three different charter schools in Los Angeles in the inner city:

- Synergy Charter Academy was started with grades K through five all at once in the first year in 2004.
- We added a middle school, Synergy Kinetic Academy, in 2008.
- This is the first year we opened our first high school. We opened with 400 kids in grades 9 through 11 all at once this past fall, and we'll be adding 12th grade next year.

What's interesting is even though we'll have three schools that span K through 12 eventually next year, it's not a direct feeder pattern, so 80 percent of our students that are in our middle school and high school did not attend a Synergy school prior to their enrollment.

We are seeing kids with all kinds of backgrounds and experiences at different entry points through the whole K through 12, including brand new 10th- and 11th-graders who come in anywhere from the beginning of the year to midyear. I'd be happy to share about some of those experiences as well.

Slides 7 and 8

Our mission at Synergy is to eliminate the achievement gap that has persisted for generations among educationally disadvantaged students.

A little bit of our demographics: Again, our schools are located in south Los Angeles, California, historically known as South Central. Within our three schools:

- Their free- and reduced-price lunch numbers span from about 90 percent to 97 percent.
- Our English learner population, which is 100 percent Spanish speaking, varies from 22 percent to 52 percent.
- Our special education population is around 8 percent to 10 percent.
- Our Latino population is 92 percent to 96 percent.
- African-American students are 3 percent to 8 percent.
- Other ethnicities are about 0 percent to 1 percent.

These are the demographics of our three schools.

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Before I go into our specific English immersion program, it's helpful to understand the background and why it's so important to talk about this topic today. This is a graph that shows the achievement gap in California. In California, they take the California Standards Test in Grades 2 through 11. There's a variety of different tests from English language arts, math; some grades actually take history and science as well. These are the elementary school scores in Grades 2 through 5, and it generates what is called an academic performance index score. The goal for all schools in California is to get an 800 or higher score. You'll see in the span of the last seven years that all students have been improving and they're making a positive upward trajectory, but what you don't always hear or people don't always know about or see is this big gap. Even though everyone is improving, there's still this big gap between different groups. As many of you know, that's known as the achievement gap. That's one of the reasons why Synergy opened: to try to help eliminate this achievement gap between different student populations.

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This graph gives you a better picture of the neighborhood that we're working in. This is the local south LA elementary school, local south LA middle school, and local south LA high school in our community, so these are the schools our kids would go to if they didn't come to a Synergy school. These are their most recent standardized test results in English language arts. You'll see just as recently as last spring, in 2011, there's still a high need to try to improve the literacy rate in our community. It is a high Latino population, a high-poverty population, and a high English learner population. Even in elementary school, you'll see that none of the grades were able to get higher than 38 percent of the kids reading at or above grade level, and then it actually takes a big dive in middle and high school when the curriculum gets harder. You'll see that in middle school it spans 14 percent to 22 percent and in high school 14 percent to 16 percent of students score what's considered proficient or advanced, meaning considered at or above grade level based on standardized test scores. This is the community that we're working in.

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These are Synergy's results over the years. In 2005, we got an API, or an academic performance index score, of 709; again, the goal is an 800. We didn't reach the goal, but we did exceed our student population statewide. You'll see the African-American and Hispanic students in 2005 performed significantly lower than our students of the same demographics. We still weren't satisfied because that was not eliminating the achievement gap. You'll see that over the past five years we have been able to show that Latino and African-American students in a low- income community with a high-poverty, high English learner population can succeed academically and can bridge that gap. I'll show you a little bit more what that means in terms of proficiency scores.

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This is a scan of our proficiency scores over the year in English language arts in Grades 2 through 5. In California, students do start taking standardized tests as early as second grade. You'll see the Synergy scores are in blue, and our first year we only got 28 percent of our kids reading at or above grade level. That actually made us the number one school in our community, with 28 percent of our kids reading at grade level. You'll see, compared to a local nearby school, in the span of seven years, they finally got to the level where they're at 29 percent. If you look at the red line, in 2011 the local neighborhood school had increased to 29 percent of their students reading at or above grade level, but our scores have gone up to as high as 74 percent; last year, it dipped down to 69 percent. The reason for the dip is that we actually expanded our elementary school last year. We moved to a new facility last year; half of our staff was brand new and two-thirds of our students were brand new, so we grew significantly more. In our experience, it does take at least one or several years to get students who normally come performing one or more years below grade level—in our experience, a lot of kids come several years below grade level— some time to improve those scores. We knew that we would take a little bit of a dip by expanding so much bigger than we have in the past, but we were quite pleased that the dip was really not as big as we thought it would be.

We're excited to share what are some of the things we did to train our new staff and to get our new students to be able to increase their literacy scores at a faster rate.

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How does that translate those proficiency scores again back to the API scores? You take those proficiency scores in elementary schools, mainly English language arts and math, and then you convert those to an academic performance index score where again the goal for all California schools is 800 or higher. The perfect score is 1000, which would mean if you had 100 percent of your students score advanced on everything in all grades, you would get 1,000 points. Our overall school API was 887 last school year and you'll see, compared to nearby schools who got 703, that tends to be the average in the community. Hispanics, our students in the darker blue, scored 898 versus the community school's score of 708. Again on the left-hand side, for African-Americans, the score is 770 for us at Synergy and 621 at the nearby school. Then, for English learners, you'll see that we're able to get our English learners pretty on par at 872 versus the neighborhood school at 692. We are aware that our African-American population was lower this last year, so we are definitely targeting that population in addition to continuing to do the work we're doing with the English learner Hispanic population.

One of the great things I'd like to share with you is that we are starting to share out our practices with the traditional public schools in our neighborhood. Our goal is that we're all neighborhood community schools— we're all serving the same kids—so we want all schools to succeed and we want all schools to get the results that we've been able to achieve over the years. We're excited with our partnership with LASD, which is Los Angeles Unified School District, to move forward with sharing best practices.

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Because of the results that our elementary school has received over the years, last November 2010, our elementary school became the first elementary school in south LA, the first charter school in LA, to receive the National Blue Ribbon award, which is the highest honor that an American public school can earn. We got a lot of other distinctions over the years, as you see on the slide, for the work that our staff and students have achieved:

- In 2007, we were National Charter School of the Year, which was named by the Center for Education Reform.
- The California Department of Education named our school, in 2008, a California Distinguished School.
- The California Charter Schools Association awarded our school the California Charter School of the Year in 2008.
- Another distinction is the 2009 Title I Academic Achievement Award for serving a high low-income population and getting positive results with that population.

There's a program through a group called EPIC where they did a value-added model to show that not only were our overall scores were high, but that we actually were showing large leaps of improvement in individual value-added scores of our students. In 2008 and 2009, our elementary school got the Silver Gain Award for the value-added model.

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What's our instructional philosophy? This will help you understand what we're trying to do and why we picked the structured English immersion model. I actually started the charter school with my husband Randy who is also a former LA Unified school district teacher, so we're a total start-up, mom and pop— two teachers passionate about the city and education reform—who took out a line of credit on our house to start our first school, completely grassroots. I know a lot of you on this phone call are probably in similar situations, so one of the things you want to think about when you're starting your charter school is what is your philosophy, what is your model, and what is your purpose? For us as former [AUDIO SKIP] use a charter school as an incubator route to prove that we can get results with the same kids and a very similar instructional model, and then bring it back and share it with the system because we care passionately about [AUDIO SKIP] both our previous schools in the district and wanting to really work together and be partners to transform the system together.

It was important to us that our model was replicable. We talked about things like dual language programs, which we highly support. Personally, I think that learning a second language is really powerful, but we wanted to stick to our model of can this be replicable? We felt like, nationwide, if we want a strategy that can work both in rural and urban schools in the

suburbs and schools that might have one English learner versus schools that have super high populations like ours that we pick a model that could work in these varieties of areas. While we love dual language programs and bilingual education programs, that's not always possible and replicable in other communities. You can't always get, in certain areas of the country, 100 percent of your staff who can speak a certain language and be bilingual to be able to implement those programs. I encourage you to look on the National Charter School Resource Center website for a future webinar on dual language programs.

For today's purpose, it's a structured English immersion program where, when we first started, pretty much for at least the first four to five years, none of our administrators and none of our teachers could speak Spanish fluently. Yet, we got these incredible results. I'm going to share with you what we do to still work with an English learner population without really knowing much Spanish ourselves, and still get results.

We also have a traditional school year. In LA Unified, the schools are on a 180-day calendar, so we chose this to make sure that we also were able to show that we can make this happen and get results under the same number of school days and the traditional school day too. Our elementary school actually shares a campus with a traditional LA Unified school, and they have the exact same bell schedule and the exact same recess and lunch together. They start at 8:00 a.m. together and end at 2:25 p.m. Monday through Friday. Our middle school and high school has either an 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. or 8:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. model, so it's not that much different from what you see in traditional public schools across the country.

You'll see as you go through the presentation that our goal is to work under traditional instructional methods, but we tweak them in a way to increase instructional efficiency and effectiveness. I'll go through some more specific examples, but one thing to think about is what traditionally takes teachers 45 minutes to teach in a class, we tell our teachers to get it down to no more than 20 minutes, like [Inaudible] 10- to 20-minute segments, and then give kids more time to practice or move on to another lesson. We try to make it more quick, efficient, and effective, and then do that every day so that the kids get a lot more time with access to the curriculum. I'm going to go through some specific examples on what I mean by that.

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What are the strategic instructional strategies we use?

- We do believe in explicit direct instruction of the English language. I do have at the end of this presentation a list of references, so for all this stuff, you can get a copy of the references. That's one of the new pages, so if you downloaded the presentation in the e-mail message this morning, you'll want to go back and make sure you download the revised one that includes the actual reference pages.
- I'm going to talk about using the Gradual Release of Responsibility model by Fisher and Frey.
- There's a Sandwich Approach model that I've coined, and I'll share what that means.
- We also provide hands-on opportunities such as field trips.
- We use a variety of modalities, like visual picture cues, songs and chants, and Total Physical Response.
- Reading is so fundamental to what we do, so we read, read, read, and we teach literacy throughout all subjects and all grade levels K through 12.

I'm going to go through each one of these points now in more detail.

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We're really big on research-based practices. There's this document called *Put Reading First;* it's also on the reference page at the end of the presentation, and it's a free document on the U.S. Department of Education website that you can download, print out, and hand out to your staff to use for staff development. It talks about the importance of explicit direct reading instruction and the five factors that most influence reading success. Those five factors are:

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Fluency
- Vocabulary

- Reading comprehension

We train our teachers, not just in elementary school, but we put our middle school and high school teachers through this training over the summer when they're brand new to us. Even if they're a PE, history, science, or math teacher, they all go through this, and we give them strategies on how they can implement this in their different subject matters.

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I'm going to give you specific strategies on how we implement those five factors. In 2007, I had the opportunity to visit Finland's education system on a weeklong education tour; we visited an elementary school, a high school, and a university, and here are some of the insights I learned from that.

Part of our philosophy at Synergy is that we're always lifelong learners, both adults and students, so even though we got all those great results in 2007, I still wanted to learn from the best. Finland is known to have the highest literacy rate in the world, the best education system, so why not go figure out what else we can do to improve our practice. We're constantly also trying to improve what we do.

One of the things that came out of the trip was that people said, "Well, they're different demographics; they don't have as many different language dynamics and challenges that we may have in big urban cities in America." Some folks noticed they don't start school until age 7, so maybe it's a maturity thing; maybe we shouldn't have our kids start school until later; maybe we're starting them too young. I'll tell you that I was really nervous that people were picking that as a best practice, and I'm going to explain why in a second, especially because I was a first-grade teacher and I saw kids already so far behind when they came to me at age six. I'll share with you a little bit why I'm worried about that.

Some folks noticed the people we spoke to said, "Well, you know our children in Finland love watching American TV, so they have to read the Finnish subtitles when they watch TV, so maybe that's why our kids can read a lot more because they have to read when they're watching TV." That was an interesting perspective.

Another thing was that they do have a tougher screening process to become a teacher. It was only something like the top 15 percent or so can become a teacher. It's a very rigorous process. It's not just that anybody can say I'm going to study to become a teacher, so they screen at the university level very rigorously. It is something like a six-year process. You do have to come out with a master's degree. They said they do teach their teachers both qualitative and quantitative research methods, so they have to go through that whole rigorous program before they can actually become a teacher.

Those are some of the different nuggets that people got from that program and that tour. I still actually wasn't satisfied with any of these answers and insights that people thought about, so I came home and was showing my husband the pictures from my trip and said, "You know, I had a great time; I learned a lot. There are definitely some things I can learn from, like maybe our students should start reading, even if it's English subtitles; maybe they should put that on when they watch TV—some really interesting things." I said, "You know, I'm still not quite sure what it is and I know I'm missing something." As I was showing him pictures, I had this "aha" moment of what I felt was one of the biggest factors of their success. I'm going to show you some pictures that I took that gave me that "aha" moment, and I want you to look at the pictures and see what you think.

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What do you notice in the photos? This would be a great time for you to type in some of your responses. Don't be shy; I see some people typing. I see folks saying that they see symbols and visuals coupled with text. Several people have noticed that—pictures and written signs. That's definitely what most people gravitate towards is pictures and signs, and that's definitely one of the strategies we use is the visual cues, the visual pictures. When you're talking about something verbally, if a student can't visualize it, absolutely… but there is actually something else that I noticed that was a big "aha." I said, "Oh my goodness; this makes a lot of sense." Someone is saying possibly there may be words written in two languages.

I'm going to share with you my big "aha" moment. Here it is: The words in Finnish are long; they're like four, five, six syllables compared to the English language. I'm going to go back; you take a look. You see how just to say the word "car," like "no cars," it's "talvikunnossapitoa"; "no cars" is

six syllables long. You want a pie or a cookie in the window; if you look at the picture in the bottom left. it's ”riisipiirakka”—it's four, five, six syllables just to say “I want a cookie” or “Mom, look at the car.” They're not just saying little baby words.

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My big “aha” is… you know, this is why I was so worried when folks were coming back saying it's a maturity thing— our kids should not start school until age seven—because as a first-grade teachers I saw it was the opposite; kids need to start earlier. When I went to Finland and came back, I saw it's not necessarily about the years of seat time in school; it's about what we're actually teaching them—the content. So many kids come into kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and the teachers say, “I don't know what happened because they were able to read. They were at or above grade level in first and second grade.” Then all of a sudden in third grade, we take this big dive in English. You've heard that, right? Reading by age nine, reading by third grade is so big, but if they're not being taught how to decode and actually break down and read words, you might be fooled as a teacher or parent to think my kid can read.

These are words that our kids would read in America: It's “bee,” “car,” “bug,” “I like my mom.” My kid can read and write, but then when they get to 3rd, 4th, 5th, 8th, or 10th grade, you see that big dive in our community where only 14 percent of the kids are reading at or above grade level. It's because no one taught them how to read. What the Finnish are teaching their kids at age seven is ”suurikasvuinen” ;it's a six-syllable word that they're reading at age seven versus our kids who are still reading one-syllable words at age five, six, or seven. Our big take away from that is I did a parent presentation and a staff presentation that year that said “big words are not just for big people.”

For example, I was in a fourth-grade classroom the other day and they were reading a novel. The teacher was engaged in a discussion and they were talking about why did a character do a certain thing and why did they purchase something this way, and a kid said, “Because it was cheap; it was cheaper to do.” A lot of teachers would say, “Yeah, that was cheap” and then move on, but our teacher said, “And another word for cheap is inexpensive.” She was teaching them a bigger vocabulary word and using that teachable moment, and then she went and syllabicated it in the air

with the kids verbally and said, “Syllabicate it with me, ‘in-ex-pen-sive, inexpensive.’” Then she wrote it on the board and she said, “Because you syllabicated it, we can now write it on the board—inexpensive.” She’s teaching them a larger vocabulary word, but she’s also teaching them how to actually decode and read that word. Big words are no longer scary for our students.

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That’s an example [AUDIO SKIP] in science; you can do that in history where you’re reading about the Constitution and so many kids are saying “What’s that?” “How do I read that?” “How do I read the Declaration of Independence?” You can syllabicate that in the history lesson. How do I do that in a chemistry class or a biology class where they’re having to now read the periodic table elements? You can syllabicate it; you can teach them that they don’t have to be scared of big words. They can read words like helium because you’ve taught them the specifics of how to break down the English language and how to break them into syllables, how to sound them out, and how to not just guess.

Here’s a Gradual Release of Responsibility model by Fisher and Frey. This model is how we’re able to get more efficient time in getting the kids to do more of the work eventually on their own. It’s like the whole thing where instead of giving a kid a fish, you’re teaching them how to fish for themselves; it’s a Chinese proverb. Or another thing why I like this model, and I’m going to describe it [AUDIO SKIP], but before I describe it, I want to explain to you why I like this model. It’s because when I was a teacher, I was trained that if your kids are below grade level and they can’t read the material and they can’t write the material, let’s put them in a group where you pair them—where there is a higher level kid who can read the material, there is a kid who can write, and then the kid who cannot read or write. It won’t make them feel bad because they can be the oral presenter for the group project or they can be the person who creates the visual presentation [AUDIO SKIP] project and then they present their presentation based on it. They’re accessing grade-level content and therefore the kid doesn’t feel bad that they don’t have the skills to do it themselves. Now I say that because that, in and of itself, is not a bad model. It’s definitely a strategy that can be helpful for kids to get involved to do group projects. By itself, in my opinion, it’s not enough because what I’ve seen is that for so many years those same kids were never actually

taught the tools to be able to access the curriculum eventually by themselves. They definitely get to participate and they get access to the grade-level curriculum to a certain extent, but they never fully get access to it by themselves. No one has ever taught them how to read and write [AUDIO SKIP] by themselves.

I saw students who would come to our elementary school for the first time in fifth grade and they would get all these good grades on their report cards and then they're only reading at a first-grade level. "How did you get by?" When I would interact with them and watch them, I'd say, "This student has very good oral presentation skills." She can get by faking it, by constantly participating and paying attention to verbal and visual cues of a teacher's body language, and things like that. There was one particular student I can think of who… I was really amazed that she really could get by and trick teachers with her oral presentation skills and constantly talking and participating in class. She thought she really knew what she was doing, but when you sat down and pulled her aside one on one, she could not read almost anything on her own. I can't remember if she came to us already with a disability—I see a question about disability—but she definitely had a learning disability as well. Either we tested her for that and/or she came to us that way—I can't remember now—but she did also have a learning disability, so it was through these strategies that we were able to help her to break it down. Some kids have a visual processing challenge and they need these cues of breaking down the syllables and seeing how you break apart the words visually, so they can see that pattern.

What I like about the Gradual Release of Responsibility is the method to help kids be able to access the curriculum, but also hold them personally accountable for having to learn the material eventually themselves. The way it works is that first "I Do"; it's like a direct instruction model where the teacher demonstrates what the lesson is—how you do long division, for example—then we do it together, the teacher and the kids. You tell me what was the second step again, and the teacher writes it while the kids take notes, and the kids are verbally engaged. This is step 2. Here's step three: The teacher asks questions of the class as a whole, then they do it together. This is more of the pairing of kids. Kids can work either with a neighbor, in pairs, or in a small group, depending on what the project or the concept is. They get that peer support and help and they're getting that interaction together. Then, the teacher wanders around the classroom

and checks to make sure—checks for understanding—that the kids are able to get that peer support. The end goal is the students need to be able to do it by themselves.

What we try to do is for the kids to get that practice before they leave for the end of the day, so that the homework is you reinforce the skills that you know; at least 80 percent of the kids in the class are able to do it by themselves. That homework should be there to reinforce skills you know they are successful at, just to give them that extra practice. That homework is not this whole new thing where they have to figure out how to answer that word problem by themselves when you never showed them how to do it or you never gave them practice to be successful with immediate teacher feedback before you sent home the homework. So, that's our model. You need to get all of that stuff done whenever you introduce a new concept before you expect them to do it on their own.

People think then we don't do project-based learning. We do it. We do a little bit of both, but it's that we don't let them go into the project- based learning or do a project until they have a grasp and went through this model. You know that the kids are going to be successful, and then they can apply their learning to a project instead of having them jump into a project with either little or no guidance and not really getting that rigor. Our goal is give them the foundation so they can build upon it with more rigor. It's our philosophy.

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The Sandwich Approach is something that I coined because the challenge is so many schools experience kids who come… I'll use this example: In our first year, we had an upper grade teacher who said, "Look, I'm supposed to teach fifth-grade standards, but the majority of the kids are reading at a second-grade level, performing in math at a first- or second-grade level, but I'm charged by the state to teach them fifth-grade level standards." This is what I help do with our teachers. I said, "Look, it's like a sandwich; the top bread is your grade-level standards and the bottom bread and everything in between are all the other skills they were supposed to have known before. Your challenge as a teacher is you need to teach all of those skills because, for whatever reason, they didn't get them or weren't proficient in them when they came to you." For example,

in fifth grade you have a lot of kids who need first- through fifth-grade skills. Kindergarten/first grade is like the bottom bread, and then you have your lettuce, tomato, and cheese, and all those other grade-level skills—second, third, fourth—and then your top bread, the fifth-grade level skills.

How do you do that? Because I taught those first and third grades, I went into her classroom and helped her teach. Our school used the Open Court Reading program, so I went in and taught her the Open Court sound spelling cards that she would do with her kids every day. I did it first and modeled, and we would chant them. What those phonics-type skills allowed the kids to do is have a sound/symbol corresponding the picture to letter patterns and letter sounds that will help them with both reading decoding and with writing. How do I write the word “tough”? What kind of spelling patterns make the “F” sound at the end? Is it F, is it GH, is it … ? It gives them these tools and the power to be able to use them, so they’re not just guessing—they actually have some tools they can use.

It doesn’t have to be long. Initially, it takes 20 minutes to introduce the different letters and sounds, but over time it was a quick five- minute review and then we got into the instruction. She can refer back to that when they’re breaking down fifth grade-level vocabulary words. How do you teach all of those sandwich items in a limited amount of time in a limited amount of a year span? That’s an example of that.

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We also believe in hands-on opportunities. So many people I talk to feel like the only way to get high results is test prep or only teaching reading and math and we don’t really get into history or science. We believe the opposite. We want to be a model to show that our kids get PE every day; they get history and science every day. We believe in putting in our budget that they go on field trips and they have experiences with other adults and other students.

These are some of the pictures that show…At the top left are our students at a middle school at a science fair. They were in different groups and they had to come up with a science fair project as a group, so they had to demonstrate their experiment in front of a judge who is a community member. That’s them interacting with adults and having to explain to a stranger who is not somebody from the school what their project was

about. On the top right side of the picture is an adult who came in for career day to help explain what their job is and what they do for a living, and letting the kids interact and ask questions. On the bottom left is an option trip over spring break for kids who wanted to go. They would raise money to go on a day trip to Sacramento, California, where our state capital is.

They took a plane ride for the first time on that trip and that was so powerful because when we were preparing the students for that trip, one of the students raised her hand to ask—when we were explaining how to go through TSA security and things like that, what to expect, how to put on the seat belt, what the etiquette is on an airplane—"When I'm on the airplane, can I roll down the window and touch the clouds?" These experiential trips are so powerful because when she reads about an airplane or when she writes about an airplane, if she has never been on an airplane, she had no idea that it's not the same as a car. You can't just roll down the window of an airplane. It teaches them about science and oxygen and [Inaudible] oxygen, you're going to get sucked out of the airplane and you can die, so don't roll down the window.

The picture on the right-hand side was taking the kids to the local Los Angeles Harbor on a boat tour. That was a free trip sponsored by the LA Harbor for our fifth-grade students and it was so powerful again because one of the students on this trip was reading a book. She said to my husband, "Yeah, I just finished this great book." He asked, "What's it called?" She said it was called the *Yellow Yacket,* and he said, "That's interesting; I've never heard of the *Yellow Yacket".* She said, "Yeah, I thought it was interesting. I've never heard of a yacket either." He said, "Can you show me what book you were reading?" She showed it to him, and it was the *Yellow Yacht.* She'd never been on a yacht; she'd never been on a boat, so she didn't know it was called a yacht. She says, "It's this whole book about a yellow yacket." Again, these experiential experiences are so important, so that when they read about them and talk about them, they have some hands-on understanding of what they're reading, writing, and talking about.

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We do believe in holistic education:

- We do have PE every day for our kids.

- We do have hands-on projects and experiments.
- We do believe performances and oral language development are so key, with songs and chants. Our kids do perform in front of their parents and sing songs.
- We do Total Physical Response, which is basically pairing body language.

I did this chant when I was a teacher where when we would do right angles, the kids would hold up their hands in a right angle. Then we would do obtuse, and the kids would hold their hands out a little bit further, and then they would put their hands closer together. We would say "acute," and then we would say "a cute little angle." [AUDIO SKIP] do these hand motions and things like that and then visual picture cues, whenever possible, especially with teachers these days using PowerPoint presentations. Being able to find things on the internet, putting them on your PowerPoint presentations, showing it to the kids—you have so much more greater access to images these days, thanks to technology, and you're able to put that into your lessons.

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I had mentioned that reading, reading, reading is key, so we do train our teachers, regardless of their grade or subject matter, on how to integrate reading strategies into their lessons. We also have a program in all of our schools K–12 that's called the Scholastic Reading Counts program. It is a computer-based program that we purchased from Scholastic where our kids read books at their independent reading level from our library and then they're able to take quizzes through Reading Counts. It's just like those who have Accelerated Reader, so it doesn't matter what kind of program you have; it's just that you have some accountability system that you hold the kids accountable to their reading.

When I was a teacher, prior to all this fancy technology, it was really hard for me to keep track if my kids were really reading. I did ask kids to borrow books from my classroom library, I had them keep a reading log, and I had them write book reports, but at the end of the day I don't know if they actually read the book. They could have just read the first and last chapters or the back cover, and written something up. It was so hard to keep track if you have 30 kids; if you're a secondary teacher and you have 150 to 200 kids that come in through each day, how do you keep track

that they actually read? What's so great about the computer is that you will not pass the quiz unless you actually read the book. It holds them accountable to that. What's great about that is it supplements our curriculum, so this is not the main reading program. Our teachers do that direct instruction with the Gradual Release of Responsibility model for reading instruction of grade-level material. What this separate computer lab program does is it helps you both intervene for kids who are below grade level and accelerate for kids who are at or above grade level. A third grader who reads at an eighth-grade level can read and borrow books at a higher level versus a kid in eighth grade who's reading at a second- grade level who can read books at a second-grade level and feel successful. Our goal is to build stamina.

So many kids come to us for the first time even in high school, who say, "No one has ever had me read a whole book by myself from beginning to end." We're now holding them accountable and giving them that foundation to be able to read a whole book by themselves, and the goal is to build up that stamina so that if they're behind grade level, they can get to gradually harder and longer books and eventually get to grade level. We also do have Rosetta Stone in English for our English learners who are really struggling in English and need that basic foundation. That is another way we use technology to help the students.

Slide 26

This graph shows why reading so fundamental because you'll see how if kids are struggling in reading, they're going to struggle in all the other subject matters because they're not able to read the curriculum. On the left-hand side is South Los Angeles, a local high school in our community. ELA is English language arts, so you see in grades 9, 10, and 11, they only have 11 percent, 15 percent, and 18 percent of the kids at or above grade level. These scores are slightly different from the ones I showed earlier because this one was from 2010 versus the other slide, which was from 2011, but you'll see essentially the scores are still very similar. They're low. You'll see how it affects world history, U.S. history, and biology. They're not able to access the content because they can't read it.

In a more affluent community—this is a free public high school in a more affluent community and is about 20 minutes away from our community—you see their kids are strong in reading in Grades 9, 10, and 11. At least

70 percent to 80 percent are able to read at grade level; therefore, that has a direct correlation to their ability to access the content in world history, U.S. history, and biology.

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In a nutshell, what are some lessons learned based on these different strategies we've implemented? Our successes have been that at least at the elementary school—our middle school only has three years of test scores and our high school is brand new so it doesn't have test scores yet—we have seen traction in all the grades that have been tested, two through eight, over the last multiple years. The exception, like I mentioned, was in last school year 2010–11 when our elementary school expanded, so two-thirds of the students were brand new. We did take a little bit of a dip, but were quite pleased that it really wasn't that big of a dip as we anticipated.

Many students who arrive below grade level in grades K–8 are now reading at or above grade level. We hope to see the same the same thing at our high school, but we don't have those results yet since we just opened the high school this year.

Then, teachers can effectively teach English learners without knowing how to speak the student's primary language. One thing I didn't put on here; whenever possible, it's not that we don't value having teachers know the language. If they do, that is great. But we don't require it; we do tell teachers if they know some Spanish to use some of it, in the sense of using it in your lessons to explain to students the power of knowing another language. I didn't put it in this slide presentation because it is in one of the other presentations that you can download from the National Charter School Resource Center website, which is on best practices of working with English learners at the secondary school level. One of the strategies they highlighted was using cognates—that is how you leverage words in Spanish that are very similar to words in English to empower kids. To say to them, "Look, because you know Spanish, you know a lot more higher level English words than you realize." We do teach our teachers to implement that whenever possible when they do have the ability to understand some Spanish, and use that in their lessons to empower their students. That is another strategy we use, but I didn't

highlight it because I wanted to let you know to look at that other presentation.

The challenge we've had with these strategies is that it's been easier to implement them at the elementary school level; secondary teachers have had a harder time. They have a higher learning curve to overcome and how to integrate foundational reading strategies into their lessons, but the first and second points go hand in hand: Why is it easier to implement at the elementary school level? Partially, because when you go into elementary school and you go into training, you know that you're being trained or that your goal is to help teach the foundational beginning reading.

When you're a secondary teacher, you're not thinking that. You're thinking I'm going to be teaching them Shakespeare and all this great literature, which absolutely you want to definitely do. In addition, with kids coming in who are 5 to 10 years below grade level, you also need to empower them to learn how to read. A challenge that secondary teachers have in communities like ours is rethinking their role as a teacher that is both; it's a sandwich approach. You have to train yourself now to learn that I am teaching grade-level standards and I'm teaching all the other grade levels that they missed, and how do I do that? They haven't been taught. Secondary teachers aren't necessarily trained in that manner, so what we do in our training is we retrain them on how to do that. It is more difficult to help high school students as well as middle school students who are five or more years below grade level in all subjects because they're that much further away. It's not impossible; we've seen great traction at our middle school already of kids coming in for the first time, seventh and eighth graders, reading at a second- , third- , or fourth-grade reading level.

I had a student share with me the other day. She came to our school in sixth grade reading at a fourth-grade reading level, and she's only been with us for a year, a year and a half now—she's half way through her seventh-grade year—and she said she's already at or above grade level. She's reading *Twilight* now; she said she wasn't able to read and she hated reading before coming to our school, so these different strategies and the Reading Counts program that also empowers her to be able to read books at her independent reading level have helped her really catapult her reading achievement in just a year and a half. These are

powerful things that we're seeing in our classrooms, but it's definitely harder the older they are.

Slide 28

Here's a list of references. Some of them I directly reference in the presentation. Some of them, due to time, I haven't had a chance to reference, but I want to let you know that these are all really great articles that support the different things that we're doing at our schools and the different strategies that I shared with you today. The last bullet point on the Southern Regional Education Board is a great resource for those of you at the secondary school level. For middle school and high school, it talks about exactly what I mentioned—that we still need to teach kids how to learn how to read, even at the secondary level, not necessarily just because they're below grade level. Even kids at or above grade level still struggle because the words become bigger, the type of reading is different now; they're reading more heavily the nonfiction textbook reading. How do I now read a biology textbook and how do I break down those words that are unfamiliar to me? They still need to know those tools on how to attack and read their grade-level material.

That's the end of my presentation, so I'll take any questions at this time.

Slide 29

PEGGIE: Great. Thank you, Meg; that was really interesting. You gave us lots of very specific strategies. You have lots of questions, so we'll get to as many as we can. I think probably the easiest one is: Julie is asking how many students there are per class at your Synergy schools, approximately?

MEG: We started off with 20 to 1 in Grades K through 5 for maybe the first four years and then, due to budget cuts, we had to increase class sizes in at least fourth and fifth grades to 25 to 1 for a couple of years. This last year we increased all Grades K through 5 to 26 to 1, again because of budget cuts in California. So, at the secondary level, our middle school, the average class size is 32 to 1, again because of budget cuts. It's not ideal, and our high school is anywhere from 15 to 40 plus in a class. We do have classes with 42, 43 kids at the high school level, again because of budget cuts. The cuts have been pretty severe in California, so our class sizes

have had to increase because of that. We do not have any instructional aides or TAs in the middle school or high school, and the elementary school, for most of the years we've been in existence, did not have TAs. Only recently, I'd say in the last two years, our K through 2 classes, I believe, have some kind of instructional aide or assistant for 45 minutes a day.

PEGGIE: Great, thank you. Erica is asking about English language development. Do you do special classes or special pullouts to help your ELLs with English language development or do you integrate English language proficiency strategies into the core content classes?

MEG: We do not have a separate English language development block, schedule, or time period or use a separate type of curriculum; instead, it's all integrated into the curriculum. For K through 5, it is part of their regular English language arts instruction, but they get direct instruction on how to break down and syllabicate words. We do phrasing on how to phrase passages, how to make sure you look for the periods and the punctuation to understand what those mean, and how you read sentences that way. In middle school and high school, all students have a separate elective period class that is their computer lab component, which serves as an extra literacy block for all students whether they're at or above grade level or not. If they're below grade level, all the kids go through that and that's where we do our Reading Counts program where they borrow and read books at their independent reading level, and we have a couple of other different instructional computer-based programs like Rosetta Stone English—things like that.

PEGGIE: Great. Another simple question before I give you a more complicated one. Corinna is asking: Do you welcome visits to your campuses? If people would like to come and see all your great work, do you have special visits set up or how would they come and see what you're doing?

MEG: Yeah, we do. It all depends on the time and whether we have time because we have gotten some questions… We do some tours; we do what we call a Synergy Trade Secrets tour. We call it that because so many people come and say, "What's your secret?" We're happy to share, and a lot of them are what I shared today. We do them at our elementary and middle schools. At this point, because it's getting toward the end of the school year with spring break and everything, it's a little bit harder to

do at the end of the year, but definitely from the fall up until this point, we're happy to do them. That doesn't mean we won't do them for the remainder of this school year; it's just harder for us to do with all of the end-of-the-year activities, but you can e-mail me. My e-mail is on our website: wearesynergy.org. [AUDIO SKIP] don't do any tours there yet, but in the future that may be a possibility.

PEGGIE: Great. We've had a couple of questions. I just want to mention to the group there were a couple questions about learning disabilities, so we will have a whole webinar about making response to intervention models specific to the needs of ELLs. We will have a whole webinar devoted to that topic on April 19th, and I encourage you to register for that. Meg, could you talk a little bit about any special strategies that you use for your students with disabilities—how you track their progress—those kinds of things?

MEG: It's very similar to what I shared with you, but then in a much smaller setting. We do a combination of push-in and pullout, where we have what we call resource specialist teachers who are fully credentialed special education teachers. They do a combination of pulling out kids, either one on one or in small group instruction in K through 12, as well as helping them in the classroom in their general education regular classes. They have their general education teacher, then there will be a special education teacher in the room with them as well. We do a combination of both; we train our special education teachers to do is exactly the explicit direct instruction, and we've seen a lot of growth.

We had a story about a student who came to us in sixth grade. This student was not an English learner, who only spoke English at home, but he was reading at a kindergarten level. He was a nonreader; he could not read *The Cat in the Hat* by himself. He was in sixth grade, already retained once by his previous school. In one year, while we weren't able to get him to grade level—that would have been a miracle for sure—we were able to get him at least one year's worth of growth. He was finally reading *Henry and Mudge* books by himself, and the mom was just so excited because the other programs weren't able to do that. A lot of it was just the exact same strategies that we use both in the students' general education classroom as well as giving them a lot more of that smaller group attention and/or individual attention and support using these same strategies.

PEGGIE: Great. Thank you; that's really helpful. We've had a couple of questions about teacher training. Could you talk a little bit about what qualifications you require of your teaching staff and how you train them? Do you do formal professional development in sheltered instruction? Do you use a coaching model? Could talk a little bit about selecting, retaining, and developing your teachers?

MEG: All of our teachers have to be credentialed the same way that any other teacher would who goes to public school in the state of California. They have to have whatever content credentials, but, in addition, because we have a high English learner population, California does require teachers working with a certain number of English learners, which all of our schools would require. They have to have what's called an authorization to work with English learners, which means they've had some kind of coursework training and/or passed a test. It's a combination of coursework, and they have to pass a test that means they have some kind of background on some of the things I shared on how to understand some basic English linguistics and how to teach the English language as well as understanding both what they call BICS and CALP, which is like basic English oral language development, and how they apply those strategies into the content standards. It's kind of both everyday English language ability strategies as well as developing academic English language ability. They do have to have some kind of background, but I'll tell you in my experience since I have that certification too, it's not enough.

What we find is we do have to retrain teachers, even those who went to the full-on teacher training programs and got actual classes in working with English learners. They're still not, in my experience, teaching these strategies. I think they're starting to move towards that, is what I've been seeing, but in the past a lot of the teacher education programs have not been teaching these strategies that I just shared with you as explicitly as we'd like them to. So, we end up retraining our teachers. We just do a two-day boot camp, a whole day of English language, a day and a half of English language, like some of the stuff I shared with you, like high-level stuff. Then, the teachers practice these strategies. Then they do a three-quarter day of math instruction as well. All new teachers go through two days of this new teacher training academy that's like a boot camp of these strategies. What we do throughout the year is that all of our schools do anywhere from one to two hours of staff meetings/professional development throughout the year, and that's pretty much it. Then we get

our principal, as well as myself, to go into the classrooms and help observe, coach, and mentor.

Some of our teachers have a mentor teacher in California; it's called a BTSA support provider, which is a beginning teacher support and assessment instructor. Depending on what teaching credential they have, some teachers have to go through a whole other two-year program to get a second tier of what's called a clear credential in California; they have to go through this beginning teacher BTSA program and they have to have a mentor. We go ahead and have one of our strong veteran teachers, who is now a BTSA mentor teacher, and she'll get into the classrooms and help support the teachers as well. We provide support in a variety of different ways.

PEGGIE: Great. Unfortunately, we have run out of time, but I'd like to thank everyone for joining us, and especially a special thanks to Meg for a very thoughtful, insightful, and really practical presentation that really talks about the nuts and bolts of what you do and tries to help us understand all of the strategies that you used to be successful. Thank you for sharing all of your trade secrets with us.

This is one in a series of ELL webinars; we encourage you to register for future webinars at the address on your screen. This webinar will also be archived at the following website: www.charterschoolcenter.org/webinars. I'm going to send you to an evaluation in a moment so you can share your feedback with us about the presentation and let us know what webinar topics you might like us to explore in the future.

Thank you everyone for joining us and, Meg, thank you so much for such a phenomenal presentation. Enjoy the rest of your afternoon.